

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion: Part 5

Mike [FP] is too sick to write anymore but he has five years worth of drafts, notes, outlines etc etc. The main outline from beginning to end dates to 2004. He asked me to see if I can do anything with all of this stuff so that people who read this far will know how it's supposed to end. He has pieces of a couple dozen different chapters and complete chapters for the last 4 chapters plus epilogs. He has a pile of Daily Prophet articles that are about weekly through October 1998. All of the notes together fill up 3 3" binders. I love him, really do, but obsessive is a real nice way of putting it.

So far I was able to put together the next chapter by taking scenes and outlines and Daily Prophet articles and using chronological order. It's called Death Takes No Holidays, which is what it's called in the outline. I'll at least put up the outline but drop some reviews so I know if the way I did this makes sense or is the way you think I should keep going. Hope that makes sense.

8-8-09

AMP

DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAYS

December 25, 1996

Harry sat facing the windows of the Black tower's grand hall, with a cup of cider in his hands and the churning grey sea visible in the distance. Mrs. Weasley had outdone herself, he thought. Not only had she made it a good Christmas, but she had made it his Christmas – his first Christmas in a home of his own. Despite that, he was even-tempered at best.

Point the first, Croaker had been right in one thing, despite being so wrong on all others. The idea of admitting that to Croaker was intolerable. Point the second, it seemed that Dumbledore had failed spectacularly not once, but twice: not only had he kept Harry from Madam Mcllvaine back in 1981, but he obviously hadn't done anything to secure the Mcllvaine's safety. Surely he had known about the agreement, if the Mcllvaines were as prominent a family as Mr. Tonks had hinted in his note. The betrothal agreement sat at his bedside, creased at the sides from his handling of it. Point the third, Voldemort was surely on the move. His Death Eaters were seemingly everywhere. Harry's guess in the summertime that Voldemort was down to fewer than fifty supporters seemed far off the mark.

Point the fourth – at least with respect to Harry's mood – was Hermione's visible unhappiness. He couldn't recall a time in years past that Hermione had profoundly missed her parents. Perhaps it was because she had been making a choice to stay away in the past but this time was prevented from seeing them, he thought.

Mr. Weasley stopped next to him. "Rather gloomy out there, isn't it?" he said.

"I've never seen the sea in winter," Harry said. "Is it always like this?"

"It's far stormier here than in the south of England, to be certain," said Mr. Weasley. "May I sit?"

"Please," Harry said absently.

Mr. Weasley sipped at his own cider. "Molly outdid herself for you," he said.

Harry nodded, but then sat up sharply. "Oh! Absolutely, yes – she knows I appreciated it, doesn't she? I mean, I could have said more –"

Mr. Weasley chuckled and said, "Easy, Harry! No one could suffer any doubts there. She loves you as a son, whether you like it or not."

"I like it most of the time," Harry said lightly.

"So what's troubling you, then?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry gave a wry grin. "Cutting right to it..."

Mr. Weasley returned the grin. "Despite appearances, I do see what's happening around me. Hermione's out of sorts, but that's to be expected under the circumstances. You, on the other hand...? I've seen you with some correspondence. Did you receive unpleasant news?"

Harry let out a slow breath. It occurred to him that Mr. Weasley might understand, or at least have a sympathetic ear. He also knew that the man had kept his confidences in the past. "I found out that I was betrothed," he said.

"Is that so? Well... it's uncommon in this day and age, at least for we common folk. You do come from a prominent family so I suppose it's possible," Mr. Weasley told him. "I gather that there's something in the terms that allows for a way out? If it were binding, I'd expect you to be far more unsettled."

"It's already been broken, actually," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley said, "Ah. That's good, isn't it?"

"She's dead. That's why it's broken," said Harry.

“Oh. I see,” said Mr. Weasley, and then he said nothing for a while. They sat there, cups of cider in hand, and watched the gale come in to shore.

Eventually Mr. Weasley cleared his throat and said, “I can’t think of any witches your age who have died recently... not since you’ve started Hogwarts, actually. Were you betrothed to someone on the Continent?”

Harry began, “Her name was Dierdre Mcllvaine. She was –”

Mr. Weasley broke in, “Truly? I hadn’t known there were any Mcllvaines of your age. Isn’t the last of the Mcllvaines on the Board of Hogwarts?”

“Madam Mcllvaine was her mother. Dierdre died just before my parents,” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley nodded and said, “Ah... and you’re just finding this out?” When Harry’s lips thinned, he added, “I see we’ve come to the problem.”

“Dumbledore made a mess of things,” Harry said.

“That’s been a theme these last few months,” Mr. Weasley observed.

“It’s not just that,” Harry said; “It’s hard to explain...” Mr. Weasley went quiet again and Harry was left to think on an explanation.

“I lost something. Strange, since I didn’t know it was there to lose,” he said at last.

“Are you angry over it?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry looked to the cup he held in his hands. “I suppose I am,” he admitted, “but there’s something different about it. These last few months, when I’ve been really angry, it’s been... hot, I suppose. This feels different. It’s cold somehow. It doesn’t go away...” He looked up at Mr. Weasley with a penetrating gaze. “I’ll never lose something like this again – not ever. If it’s in my reach, I’ll take it and I won’t let go. I

don't care what that stupid prophecy says about not being able to live."

Mr. Weasley nodded sagely. "There are a dozen ways one could read that part, Harry," he said. "I might see it one way, you might see it another. Professor Dumbledore had his own view on the matter, of course. I honestly think he took it at its word. But now...? Well, your godfather certainly did upset the kettle, didn't he?"

"He did that, all right," Harry agreed.

"I'm going to indulge myself for a moment. I'll ask that you listen to me and then you can set your own opinion. Will you do that much?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I've always listened to you," Harry said honestly.

Mr. Weasley put on a half-smile at that. He told Harry, "It's like this... the best things in life are so easily broken. All you need do is hold onto them too tightly. We've learnt that the hard way, Molly and me. Seize the best when it comes along, Harry, but take care that you make it last."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly.

"I'll see about freshening that cider, then," Mr. Weasley said. He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder and collected the cup from Harry's yielding hands.

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YULE-KNOW-WHO!

Yule itself has been overtaken by the spectre of terror. The death's-head-and-serpent mark rose above three more homes overnight, resulting in two deaths and six persons taken to hospital. The attacks were widely dispersed, once again causing difficulties for the DMLE.

Ministry Aurors did reach one site while an attack was under way. One of You-Know-Who's men is believed to have been severely

injured prior to escaping the scene. Dark Force Defence League volunteers reached another of the sites as an attack concluded, but did not land any spells on the enemy.

The Ministry has continued its practice of withholding the identities of those attacked. "We will not at this time release any names, as the knowledge is of no benefit to the wizards and witches of England and may in fact give aid to those who seek to terrorize our citizens," said Ministry spokeswizard Percy Weasley. This newspaper maintains its position that the Ministry is illegally withholding this information, absent a specific ruling by the Wizengamot.

- The Daily Prophet, December 26

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December 28, 1996

"Now, boys, Ginny is going to have a young man calling on her today, and I expect you to be on your best behaviour – yes, I'm glaring at you, Fred and George," Mrs. Weasley announced as breakfast wound to a close.

"A gentlemen caller!" Fred said in his poshest voice.

"I do believe you've got it, old bean!" George returned.

Ron said between bites, "Sounds stuffy to me."

"I think it sounds sweet," Hermione protested. Harry rolled his eyes and Hermione backhanded him for his trouble.

"Sounds like something Perce would arrange," Charlie said off-handedly.

The room went quiet for a long second before Fred piped up in the same affected voice, "I take it that we're prohibited from demonstrating our wares to the gentleman?"

George chimed in, "Oh, please, Mater! It would be tragic were we to deny our trade to such a fine and upstanding –" Ginny, who was already nicely reddened, hurled a banger at George and caught him between the eyes. She matched the throw with Fred before either could react.

"Oh, dear! Violence! That just won't do!" George drawled.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

"If either of you bother Tony, I won't hex you into next week. I'll get a Time-Turner and make sure that you're drowned at birth," Ginny ground out.

Ron gave her a gimlet eye. "Tony?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Do you mean Anthony Goldstein? You're seeing Anthony?"

"I was going to visit him in London, but his brother was injured and we decided it was better if he came here. I expect I'll be right about that?" Ginny snapped. The twins looked at each other and began to smirk.

Tonks sat back in her chair and casually buffed her nails against her shirt, then made a show of looking them over. "I've had a lot of practice the last few months," she said; "It's amazing how much a girl can pick up, even after three years of Auror training and three in the field. I'd be happy to demonstrate that, boys... interested?"

"That's big of you, Tonks, really it is," Fred said slowly.

"Don't mind us, Tonksie. We're just, erm, high-spirited blokes," George added.

Bill slipped his arm around Tonks. "You should see Ron and Harry," he said, "or Ginny, for that matter. They're practically up to an Auror's standard. Ginny's the best under-age mixed duellist I've ever seen, and Harry could go on the men's circuit today. Ron could take either of them in a sabre-only duel."

“You’ve been teaching them how to use a sword?” Mrs. Weasley said sharply.

Tonks didn’t take the hint. “Bill’s a great teacher,” she burred. “Working with the students has been absolutely brill! I mean, I’d like to think I’ve held my own in the sessions when it comes to wand work, but put a sword in Bill’s hands and it’s poetry in motion. Even the Marquis de Maupassant was impressed and he’s seen every major duellist in the past two hundred years. Why, Bill put that apprentice of the Marquis on the mat in less than a minute, and she’s been ranked in France for the last three years.”

Mr. Weasley’s expression was slack. “I didn’t know you were taking that up again, Bill,” he said.

“I figured that since I’m as skilled as anyone in Britain – and that’s an established fact – then I might as well pass along what I know, since I never had the chance to put it to use,” Bill said. No one missed the hint of acid in his voice.

“Professor Dumbledore hasn’t been supportive of sport duelling in the past,” Mr. Weasley said.

Bill told everyone, “Hogwarts is fielding a team for the next junior circuit.”

Mrs. Weasley’s jaw clenched and then she began, “Ronald and Ginevra, you will –”

“ – do whatever you like, in this case,” Mr. Weasley cut her off firmly. “If that means either of you want to follow the duelling circuit for the upcoming summer, then so be it. Ginny, if you’d prefer to do something along the lines of your music, then we’ll support your arrangements. Bill, Charlie... I like to think we’d do some things differently, if we had it to do again. Fred, George... well, you’re doing what you always hoped for, so there’s nothing to second-guess, is there?”

“Er...” Charlie managed.

Mrs. Weasley squeaked, “Arthur!” just as Bill began, “Dad —”

Mr. Weasley broke into a jaunty smile. “I think that everything has been said. Harry, be a good lad and pass me the Prophet, would you?” he said.

Harry dumbly handed off the paper. The twins’ mouths opened and closed in silence. Ginny’s hands were folded in her lap and she worried her lip. Hermione looked utterly lost. Half a slice of bacon fell from Ron’s mouth.

Mr. Weasley glanced at the paper below the fold. “I’ll be switched — the Cannons are only two points back from Puddlemere! Marmalade, anyone?” he asked.

“I’m sure there’s more bread in the kitchen,” Mrs. Weasley said absently. With that, everyone at the table burst into as much conversation and as little eye contact as they could manage.

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DECEMBER 28:

ANTHONY GOLDSTEIN’s VISIT TO THE BLACK TOWER

Work in details on Anthony:

Considered Muggle-born by Wiz World despite 2000 yr history of magic in the family

Mother not pleased by idea of him dating a shikseh; told her that he’s visiting Harry and Ron

At least one reference to Anthony being in the swordsmanship group

A remark or reaction re: wizarding prejudice?

Too early to bring up death of Anthony’s father?

Not seen as a proper or full member of his own community either because of 'foreign magic' – unable to perform some of the community's magical rituals, possibly because of being capable of wandless magic ---- probably too complex for scene

Have Bill reveal that the Marquis has taken on a student; be non-specific about who or for what (let swordsmanship assumption float out there)

Let out that Ginny and Anthony have been seeing each other since October; reference their ability to keep secrets

Have Anthony comment favourably on Ginny's music; maybe a bit of support/swooning from Tonks and Hermione

A bit of crap taken, probably from the twins, but quickly put aside

Drop in a reference to Anthony's knowledge about old/ancient magic

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DECEMBER 28:

HARRY/HERMIONE INTERACTION AFTER ANTHONY LEAVES

Hermione guesses that Anthony is the one who got into her workroom, hits Harry with the guess

A bit of a fracas – don't ratchet it up too much

Shift to Hermione's frustration about being so far from her parents

Harry has a 'duh' moment, asks why she isn't glued to her mirror

Hermione has a chastened moment, wondering why she didn't think of that

Hermione confirms to Harry she has returned most of the dark material in her workroom

Hermione leaves to contact her parents; after end of conversation, Harry's inner monologue is that he's fairly sure she's not telling him the truth

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DECEMBER 30:

ATTACK ON THE PUCEY FAMILY - AFTERMATH

Contact from Dumbledore – Floo? Patronus? Niall Pucey and his family were attacked, need place to gather family and figure out what to do next.

Harry agrees to host, on account of interaction with Niall at Board meeting and growing respect for Adrian.

Weasleys are a little skittish (the Slytherin thing) but it must be OK since Dumbledore suggested it

What Harry doesn't count on is the scope of the group that arrives:

Puceys: Niall, Octavia (wife), Adrian, Estrella Claymore (older sister of Adrian), Edwin Claymore (husband of Estrella)

Dumbledore, Moody, Shacklebolt

Percy Weasley and Carl Budgette (a Fudge under-underling, responsible to Percy – recent Hogwarts grad and known to the Weasley twins as "Fuss-budgette")

Rufus Scrimgeour, Gawain Robards

Harry is less than pleased, but handles it maturely

Nature of the attack:

Percy assures that it couldn't have been Death Eaters as they don't attack pure bloods and he didn't see the Mark personally

Robards reports that the Auror response team did see the Mark

The Claymores are pressed into admitting that they did see one of the attackers, but claim that it was too dark and they can't identify the person

Adrian says the voice of one of the attackers was familiar

Dumbledore tacitly offers assistance of Order; Scrimgeour gives same response as in CH 2: can't support vigilantism, if Order doesn't enter the fold like the DFDL then there is no cooperation with DMLE; begins to upbraid Dumbledore about being at the scene at all, until Dumbledore reminds S. that he is the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and thus a legal official.

Niall Pucey begs off, citing that Octavia is exhausted and he took a stunner, says it's time to make arrangements until they can survey the house

Harry immediately offers house room, cites the statement of friendship after the Board meeting; takes Octavia and the Claymores by surprise

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ATTACK ON PROMINENT MIDLANDS FAMILY

A copycat crime, or retribution for attacks on the Muggle-born?

The home of prominent barrister Niall Pucey was burnt to the ground last evening. None of the Pucey extended family, to include son-in-law and law partner Edwin Claymore, were seriously injured. The DMLE was unable to reach the Pucey's Nottinghamshire estate in time to face the attackers. Family members reported that three to five persons in dark cloaks breached the house wards immediately prior to the attack. Although one of the responding Ministry Aurors reported seeing You-Know-Who's mark, Ministry officials who arrived five minutes later did not see evidence of the mark.

Given that the Puceys are a long-standing wizarding family, and that the recent spate of attacks have been entirely directed at newer and first-generation families, there is some speculation that this may have been the work of a copycat. An anonymous official suggested that this could have been a misdirected reprisal against You-Know-Who's so-called 'pure blood' supporters, but offered no evidence to that effect. According to Mr. Pucey, the family will relocate to London whilst they consider whether to rebuild.

- The Daily Prophet, December 31

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CELEBRATIONS TO CONTINUE AS SCHEDULED

Organisers have announced that English and Scottish wizards will ring in the New Year as they have for centuries. The 387th annual New Year celebration at Diagon Alley is scheduled to begin at half ten this evening, with fireworks provided by Alley merchants. "We didn't stop when the Muggles were throwing explosives around in the '40s, and we didn't stop the last time You-Know-Who was about, and we're certainly not going to stop now," said Diagon Alley celebration chairman Florean Fortescue.

Many Scottish wizards participate in Muggle New Year celebrations, particularly those in the vicinity of Edinburgh. The village of Hogsmeade will host wizarding Britain's oldest continuous New Year observance, which began as a simple Yuletide festival in 926 but has been called Hogmanay by Scots for several hundred years. Iain Macandra, chief of Hogsmeade's village council, echoed Mr. Fortescue's sentiments and promised that this year's Hogmanay bonfire would be the largest in many a year. The Hogmanay celebration begins at noontime today and the village bonfire will be lit at half eleven.

Gringotts officials announced yesterday that they will participate in Diagon Alley's New Year parade for the first time since 1797. Gringotts will also provide a site for St. Mungo's aid station as well as goblin holiday refreshments for those wizards of sufficient bravery. When asked for comment, a Ministry spokesperson said that she was

“agog” and “frankly, hadn’t the slightest idea what the sneaky buggers were planning”. Dirk Cresswell, who directs the Ministry’s Office of Goblin Liaison, provided a more coherent response. “Wizard-goblin relations have thawed over the last handful of years, not as much in an institutional sense but noticeably at the personal level,” Cresswell said. “Frankly, some of that may accrue to the goblin nation’s own concerns about You-Know-Who’s return. The goblin leadership also recognises that a healthy and happy Diagon Alley is good for business.”

- The Daily Prophet, December 31

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December 31, 1996

Dumbledore settled back into his conjured armchair. “I do wish you would reconsider, Harry,” he said; “While it is true that your confinement at Hogwarts has ended, that is no reason to assume needless risk by such a highly visible public appearance.”

“Appearances, actually,” Harry corrected him.

“You say that as if it somehow improves the situation,” chided Dumbledore.

“Honestly, I said it to irritate you,” Harry returned.

Dumbledore repeated more firmly, “I ask you to reconsider your plans for the evening.”

Hermione entered the Head of House's study without knocking. Harry had disabled the security ward for the duration of Dumbledore's visit, and in any case had forced Phineas Black's portrait to weave her into the ward permissions.

“Good afternoon, Headmaster. Tea?” she asked. Dumbledore amiably declined.

"We'll be at Diagon Alley – mostly around Gringotts – from ten until eleven, and then at Hogsmeade until the New Year. I've never been to a wizarding celebration before," Harry said. Dumbledore winced and Hermione took on a small but satisfied smile.

"I am sorry for that, but the security reasons for why that is the case have changed very little. If anything, they are now intensified," the Headmaster finally countered.

"I can handle myself. If I can't, then a Death Eater skirmish is the least of our worries," Harry shot back.

"Miss Granger, a word on this matter if you please?" appealed Dumbledore.

"We'll be with an armed contingent of goblins in Diagon Alley. At Hogsmeade, we're an apparation away from the castle gates, we'll have Harry's motorbike, and also an emergency portkey to return us here. We can also go through the Shrieking Shack, and I think Harry has a fifth option as well," Hermione said.

"I see you will not be dissuaded," Dumbledore sighed. "Will you at the very least consent to attend a brief meeting of the Order this afternoon? We shall be arranging some discreet security coverage for the two locations as a fail-safe for Ministry precautions."

After an interminable and – to Harry's eyes – ineffectual Order meeting; two hours of revising; and lingering stops at the Gower Street Waterstone's (as Hatchard's was already shut for the evening) and a Euston Square curry shop, Harry and Hermione made their way to the Leaky Cauldron. The security queue for entering the Alley snaked into the pub itself, and it looked as if Tom was taking full advantage of the large crowd. The wizened innkeeper caught Harry's eye for a long moment and then gave a nod in the direction of a particularly surly-looking group. Harry recognised three current and recent Slytherins amongst them; he gave Tom a respectful nod in return and manoeuvred Hermione deeper into the queue.

"It's mostly half-bloods and muggle-born here," Hermione noted after a quarter hour's wait.

Harry let his eyes rove the crowd, and asked, "How do you know that?"

Hermione observed, "Look at the robes people are wearing: they're mostly casual, and you can see that a lot of people are wearing Muggle clothing beneath – Muggle clothing that could actually blend into a crowd outside the Alley," observed Hermione. "Pure-bloods carry themselves in a certain way, as well. Not in a haughty way like Malfoy; that's not what I'm getting at. Honestly, I think many pure bloods are uncomfortable in a crowd. That makes sense, when you think on it. The only time I've ever seen a large crowd of wizards was at the World Cup, and that hardly counts."

"This is a prime target for an attack," Harry muttered.

"I can understand the Headmaster's concerns," admitted Hermione.

The DFDL security wizards were actually weighing wands, which explained the slowness of the queue and which was a great surprise to Harry. "Who's keeping the results, I wonder?" he said pointedly as they passed through.

"Quiet, you," one of the security wizards grunted.

"That certainly gives a sense of confidence," Hermione sniffed as she followed Harry toward Gringotts.

The Gringotts parade float appeared to be under wraps adjacent to the bank entrance. Although it was well past the bank's public hours, the goblins had set up a money-changing booth outside to service the muggle-born. A phalanx of security goblins was very visibly stationed on the marble steps, which would give pause to any remotely sensible attackers. As the Prophet had noted, a table of goblin refreshments was set out for brave revellers.

"I see the betting pools are going strong," Harry chuckled. A huddle of grinning goblins watched the table closely as wizards fought to hold down a variety of delicacies.

“Are you going to show them how it’s done?” Hermione asked.

Harry smirked, clawed the air with his hand, and said, “Meow!”

“Prat,” snapped Hermione.

Harry watched the table with crossed arms for a long moment and said, “A spot of tea wouldn’t hurt.”

An older goblin, dressed in the manner of a Gringotts teller, nodded to Harry and said, “What can you stomach, wizard?”

“I’d like a cup of Itsemurha, please,” Harry said casually.

The huddle of goblins went still for several seconds, and then erupted in a flurry of betting. The older goblin walked away and returned with a teapot bubbling so actively that its lid was shaking. From it, the goblin filled a thimble-sized cup with a steaming something-or-another that was the colour and thickness of paste.

Harry frowned and said harshly, “Are you insulting me? That’s no cup.” The huddle gave off a chorus of hisses and the older goblin gave the slightest of shrugs. A teacup of normal size appeared and the goblin filled it to the brim.

“Bloody hell...” one of the wizards waiting to sample an unappetizing appetizer said.

“You’re not going to ask me how I take it?” Harry hissed.

“I hadn’t planned to ask,” the goblin admitted.

“Two drops of Makea and one drop of Aloittaa, please,” said Harry. The huddle of goblin onlookers burst into another rush of betting. The goblin before Harry raised one eyebrow, but said nothing; he merely placed the requisite drops into the cup and took three paces back.

While Harry had demonstrated knowledge of goblin cuisine, none of these goblins knew that Harry had previously downed several cups of Suicide Tea with their financial and political leadership. He took the

cup in both hands, put his nose to the cup and drew in a lungful of fumes, tipped his head back, and poured the tea into his mouth from a height of several inches. The trick was in the inhaling of the fumes and the exposure to air as the cup was poured into the drinker's mouth, according to Grishtok and the other clan leaders Harry had met. Just as at the goblin hunt feast, the tea tasted rather like a strong curry. His ears and nostrils belched heavy smoke for a few moments, and then the heat and the taste subsided.

Harry sat the cup down next to the teapot, licked his lips, and said casually, "It's a bit weak, isn't it?" The goblins as one beheld him with wide eyes and gaping mouths; one amongst the huddle stumbled and fell. As soon as they recovered themselves, most of the goblins threw slips of paper at the ground in disgust.

Hermione slipped in next to Harry and they watched two half-pissed wizards ask for 'what he had'. One failed to breathe the fumes in advance, and finally plunged his head into a conveniently placed barrel of water to quash the smoke. The other breathed the fumes but put the cup to his lips and drank it down, and it was quickly apparent why the older goblin had taken three paces back after providing service.

One of the goblins in the huddle remained behind. In the shadows, it was only clear that the goblin was both wide and relatively tall, and wore a heavy and brightly patterned winter cloak. Hermione took an unconscious step closer to Harry.

"Greetings, Mister Potter," the goblin rumbled.

"Greetings, Director Fliptrask, and congratulations on your winnings," Harry returned.

"Well spotted," the goblin said after a guttural chuckle; "Will you ask for your share, or shall I just hand it over?"

"I'm only taking a share because your honour requires it. The look on the other goblins' faces was enough... and it was rather funny to bait those wizards into trying it," said Harry.

Hermione's brow rose. "This was a set-up?" she snapped.

"Naturally," Fliptrask snorted.

"This is why you came here?" Hermione asked sharply.

Harry said, "We came here because neither of us has ever been to a wizarding festival, in case you forgot. It's just convenient that Fliptrask was able to get one up on these fellows."

Before Hermione could fire back, Fliptrask said, "Mr. Potter seems to understand what gaming means to us. He also understands the meaning of position. For me to disadvantage my betters – as happened at the Feast – was unwise. For me to take advantage of Glassjaw and the tellers is most wise. For Mr. Potter to willingly involve himself... this will be a well-told tale until the equinox if not longer. It also reminds my brothers that not all wizards are like Bagman-the-thief."

Hermione looked past the food table toward the goblins preparing for the parade, and asked, "May I go over there for a few moments? I see some of the goblins attached to the Volvar."

Fliptrask nodded and barked a command toward the food table. One of the unoccupied goblins scuttled over, muttered an honorific, and took Hermione by the elbow.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Harry dropped all pretence; he asked, "Did your people get rid of Bagman, then?"

Fliptrask broke into a wicked smile and said, "You are the first to ask. Ragnok will be pleased. He placed one galleon on the possibility, at knut-to-galleon odds."

"That doesn't answer my question," said Harry.

"Gringotts is pleased that Bagman-the-thief paid for his crimes. Gringotts did not administer justice. Gringotts did not pay to have justice administered. Gringotts did not ask for justice to be

administered. No goblins participated in the administration of justice. No goblins planned the administration of justice,” Fliptrask responded.

Harry paused to think before he said, “Gringotts knows who did it, and a goblin gave that person information about Bagman.”

“You are not yet a true businessman, nor a member of the legal profession,” Fliptrask observed, “but you do have some understanding of wordplay. Nurturing this will help you in your dealings amongst the wizards.”

“And also my dealings with goblins?” Harry returned.

“Budding skills, indeed,” said Fliptrask.

“Is this person who offed Bagman... or people, I suppose... is he a danger to me?” Harry asked.

“Not an inherent danger, no,” Fliptrask said without hesitation.

“Will you help this person again?” asked Harry.

“I have never helped the individual or individuals in question,” said Fliptrask.

“Will this person receive more help from goblins?” Harry tried again.

Fliptrask said, “I cannot say. It may be so, or it may not be so.”

“Should I be concerned about this person?” Harry asked.

“You should pay close attention to any wizard or faction of wizards whose actions change or challenge the balance of power in Britain,” said Fliptrask.

“Bloody hell, this is like talking to Dumbledore,” Harry grumbled.

Fliptrask snorted, “There is no need to be insulting, Mr. Potter.”

Harry mentally picked his way through another question, and eventually asked, "Does this person threaten my interests, specifically the fight against Voldemort?"

Fliptrask pursed his lips for several seconds before he said, "In my expert opinion, the wizard or faction of wizards in question does not intend to threaten those interests, and may in fact intend to aid them. However, in my personal opinion, I see the possibility that the continued actions of the wizard or faction of wizards in question could endanger the interests you have stated."

"Are you unable to answer me directly because you're oath-bound?" Harry asked.

"No," Fliptrask said.

"Is it because of a matter of honour?" Harry continued.

After a hesitation, Fliptrask said, "Yes."

Harry nodded and said, "I'll stop asking questions, then."

Fliptrask broke into a toothy and slightly frightening smile, and then said, "I enjoy doing business with you, Mr. Potter. You are worthy of my valuable time. I tell you this: where I am not thwarted by oath or honour, I will protect and advance the interests you have stated. I tell you this also: there are many goblins who would not say the same. There are some goblins who would actively work for the opposite end."

"Lovely... I wish it wasn't so hard to know who to trust," sighed Harry.

Fliptrask said, "I will not ask for your trust, Mr. Potter, though it is an item of value. Continue to develop your skills at wordplay. Put them to use. Engage in wordplay with me. See it in the words of others. We have a lucrative relationship, you and I, and it is to my benefit and to the ultimate benefit of Gringotts and the clan that I maintain and strengthen that relationship. Where I am able, I will offer advice and counsel. It will be for you to decide whether this is an item of value.

You can expect the same, albeit to a lesser extent, from Gringotts Chief Ragnok and from Clan Chief Grishtok.”

After a long pause, Harry said, “I shouldn't expect it from others.”

“Your words; not mine,” said Fliptrask.

Harry took a glance toward the parade preparations. He saw Hermione in close discussion with three goblins clad in tall headgear and ornate cloaks. “Who are they?” he asked Fliptrask.

Fliptrask squinted hard and then answered, “They are dressed in the finery of the Volvar's personal attendants. There is a rumour that the Volvar herself will be here. If that's true, I would expect her to be in the viewing gallery with Ragnok and Grishtok.” He gestured to a long balcony high above the main doors to Gringotts.

Harry followed Fliptrask's gesture and then returned to Hermione and the three goblins. He thought he could see another figure to one side, clad in a dark cloak, but it was hard for him to see clearly amidst the bustle of several dozen goblins making last-minute preparations. He did see Hermione open her bag and exchange several things with one of the finely cloaked attendants.

“Who can you really trust?” Harry muttered.

“It is difficult with mates,” Fliptrask said.

Harry snapped back to attention. “I'm sorry...?”

“It is difficult with mates,” Fliptrask repeated. “In most ways, they are the most trustworthy of all – the only whom we can truly trust, in fact. Because they know us so well, they can also challenge our trust more harshly than the worst enemy. Keep in mind that when they deceive, it is usually to protect.”

“Are you married?” Harry asked.

Fliptrask said, “I am contract-bound. This is deeper than the normal mating rituals of wizards. For wizards... it is something like a

contracted formal betrothal. It is more than this, but something like it. You should know of this. Your family contracted you with the McIlvaine wizards from Scotland.”

Harry was gobsmacked. “You knew about that? Why didn't it come up when I took over the estates?”

Fliptrask's mouth tightened into a thin line for a long second before he said, “Dumbledore has much for which he should answer. I should not assume that you have been instructed or even informed with respect to your heritage or any expectations thereto.”

“For the most part, I don't know a damn thing,” Harry huffed.

“That is something you must change,” Fliptrask returned.

“I'm working on it,” said Harry.

Hermione returned and Harry decided to say nothing about her exchange with the Volvar's attendants. They made a brief visit to the Weasley twins' shop, greeted a few Hogwarts students and their families, but decided to leave for Hogsmeade before the actual Diagon Alley celebration began. Hermione said she was more interested in the historical significance and lore surrounding the Hogsmeade event. For his part, Harry was uncomfortable in the crowd – there were too many people in motion and too many places for people to hide. Hermione never seemed to notice the half-dozen security goblins who followed them, but Harry was glad for the extra eyes and ready swords.

After an especially lengthy bit of spinning, their goblin portkey left Harry and Hermione reeling on the path between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, about a hundred yards short of the village. Neither of them had expected a seat at the Three Broomsticks, but Madam Rosmerta somehow magicked a small table in the far corner. It was a brisk night and the hearth was roaring. They talked about nothing of consequence for what seemed like quite a long while, until the doors opened and a number of patrons rose from their chairs.

“What's this about?” Harry wondered aloud.

A wizard from a neighbouring table hissed, "To your feet, boy – 'tis the Compact Families!"

Hermione took on a perplexed expression, and asked, "And the Compact Families are...?"; she drew glares from the few who heard her.

Half a dozen elderly wizards and witches made a stately entrance and gave formal waves to those standing. They were closely followed by two somewhat younger wizards and a witch familiar to Harry.

Madam Rosmerta stood on a chair, smoothed her skirt, and then called out, "In pride and gratitude, we welcome our brothers and sister of the Compact. Soon they will lead the saining of the households, as they have done each Yule since the days of the Norse. But for now... Lilibet, pass the ale, dear... now wait for it..."

Harry and Hermione found themselves each with a flagon of ale in hand amidst a buzz of excitement neither of them understood. Madam Rosmerta was replaced on the chair by the witch who Harry recognised: Madam McIlvaine. She raised a flagon of her own, and sang in a clear voice:

Here we come a-wassailing among the leaves once green,

Here we come a-wandering so fairly to be seen.

Now is winter-time, strangers travel far and near

And we wish you and send you a happy New Year.

We hope that all your plantings will prosper fine and grow,

So that you'll have plenty and a bit more to bestow.

We hope your wethers they grow fat and likewise all your ewes,

And where they had one lamb we hope they will have two.

She took a sip of ale and raised her flagon again, and as one the rest of the patrons did the same. Harry took a hesitant sip; the ale stung at the back of his throat but he managed to hold back a cough. Hermione let out a tiny choking sound and grimaced. Madam McIlvaine stepped down to hearty applause.

Madam Rosmerta took her place and shouted, "All right, you lot, sing with me!

Wassail, wassail, all over the town,

Our bread it is white and our ale it is brown;

Our bowl it is made of the green maple tree;

In the Wassail bowl we'll drink unto thee.

Come, butler, come fill us a bowl of the best;

Then I pray that your soul in heaven may rest;

But if you do bring us a bowl of the small,

May the Devil take butler, bowl and all!

Then here's to the maid in the lily white smock,

Who tripp'd to the door and slipp'd back the lock;

Who tripp'd to the door and pull'd back the pin,

For to let these jolly Wassailers walk in!

Cheers!"

She took a long pull on her flagon and a chant grew with each second she continued; she didn't stop until it was emptied to loud cheers and whistles. With that, people began clinking together their flagons. Madam Rosmerta stepped down and led the visitors around the bar and out of view.

"That was interesting," Harry deadpanned.

"I've never seen anything like it," admitted Hermione.

Lilibet – who was one of Rosmerta's bar-maids – sauntered up to their table and told Harry, "Madam Rosmerta is asking for you; she's upstairs." Harry took Hermione by the hand and followed Lilibet up the stairs, past Detheridge's rooms and to the open door of the garret flat.

Rosmerta met them there. "Happy New Year, Harry – oh, and I see you brought Miss Granger. Nice that you can join in the festivities. Harry, this is – "

Harry moved past Rosmerta and said, "We've already met... hello, Madam Mcllvaine." He extended his hand.

Madam Mcllvaine took it firmly. "I am pleased to see you under better circumstances, Mr. Potter," she said; "Who is your companion?"

Harry motioned for Hermione to enter, and said, "Madam Mcllvaine, this is Hermione Granger. She's the top student in our year – probably in the school – as well as my... erm... girlfriend. Hermione, this is Madam Melisende Mcllvaine from the Hogwarts Board of Governors." Hermione quickly shook Madam Mcllvaine's hand, eyes narrowed.

Madam Mcllvaine laughed softly and then added, "That would be the same Melisende Mcllvaine who voted against both Mr. Potter's suspension and eventual dismissal. As for you, Miss Granger, I am well aware of your academic standing. You have featured in a fair few reports from both the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress."

Hermione's expression relaxed, but Harry could see that she was still coiled for a fight. "Thank you, Madam. Perhaps you might explain why you've summoned Harry?" she said flatly.

Madam Mcllvaine was quiet for long than was comfortable. Her gaze was focused on Hermione; she seemed to be taking Hermione's

measure, Harry thought. Her eyes turned to Harry and she broke the silence. "I was informed by the goblins that you have received a certain contract. I had thought to explain the matter, and to answer your questions if needed," she told him; "I could arrange a meeting between the two of us at a later time, if you prefer," Madam Mcllvaine offered.

Harry shook his head, and said, "No, no... this is fine. I'd asked for it, after all... just caught off guard by the timing of it. Hermione stays; she'd know the story of it eventually."

"If you're certain...? I should think it awkward," said Madam Mcllvaine.

"It wouldn't be my first awkward moment," Harry returned, which brought a smile to both women. He gestured to the dining table, as the disassembled sofa had not yet been replaced and there was only one armchair remaining in the sitting area.

Madam Mcllvaine took a seat. She waved her hand casually and the door to the stairs closed. Then she took her wand and drew glowing rune sigils in the air; Harry was reminded of Tom Riddle's glowing anagram. The first set of runes shot across the room and affixed themselves to the door and its frame. The remainder moved to the windows and did the same. Hermione's lips pressed together and Harry almost expected her to raise her hand.

"Runic protections are far more secure than room warding spells, provided one has time to work the runes," Madam Mcllvaine said. "Now then, are either of you familiar with the Compact Families? No? I suppose this should not come as a surprise; you, Harry, were raised by Lily's Muggle relatives, and you, Miss Granger, are the first of your family to be graced by magic. This will require explanation, then..."

"Twelve hundred years ago, there were two distinct groups of wizards. The first group could trace its roots from the Celts and their forebears. They practised what are now called 'old magics', although they were generally able to use wands. Their magic incorporated many rituals and was practised both individually and as a community. The second group were almost entirely wand users whose magical roots were from the Roman tradition. However, over the centuries since the

Romans had retreated from our land, their practices had been passed on through an oral tradition. Their magic was spell-bound and it was more a tool than a practice. The two groups were mostly disconnected from one another, because the second group tended to draw undesirable attention from those not graced by magic.”

“This old magic... is it practised in Iceland?” Harry asked.

Madam Mcllvaine raised a delicate eyebrow. “You know Icelanders?”

“I’m receiving tuition from an Icelandic war witch,” said Harry.

Madam Mcllvaine said, “Is that so? You may be learning some of our magics. It is ironic that a foreign witch may teach you, yet I am forbidden to teach the same magics on British soil.

“The first wizards to invade the Isle were Norsemen, and Icelandic practices come from the same source. Those Norse mages were not unlike the first group, but they did use certain spells that made travel more palatable: food preservation, ship repair, and such. More importantly, the Norse brought a strong emphasis on runic magic. Over the next hundred years, the first group – the Old Magic group, if you like – adopted many of those Norse practices.

“In 966, a group of Norse mages recently arrived on our island attacked a settlement of Roman mages – the second group to which I referred. In retaliation, the Romans slaughtered three nearby families. Two of those families were Norsemen, unrelated to the attackers. One family was from the Old Magic group. The conflict quickly spread.

“Five years later, an army of the Roman mages attacked the largest of the Old Magic communities. By way of defence, the village elders summoned a demon – a giant boar. In the confusion, the elders failed to affix all of the seals for the summoning and the demon broke free. The attack ceased, as all present were now in terrible danger. Four came forward to confront the demon.

“The second-in-command of the attacking army took on the demon directly in a blaze of spells and swordplay. A Norman mercenary who accompanied the army chased the demon away from the village with

a phalanx of transfigured wolves and a dozen conjured serpents. The daughter of one of the village elders together with a Norse rune mistress set grand wards to contain the demon atop a hill in the centre of the great forest that bordered the village. The eruption of the wards and the demon's banishment consumed everything for half a mile save the four mages; a goodly part of the forest was gone and the remainder took on part of the demon's shade.

"The second-in-command of the attacking army proceeded to defeat his own commander in single combat, and went on to declare the end of hostilities. The now-barren hill was named Hogwards Hill to commemorate the great event. The Norman mercenary took charge of the Roman mages with the new commander's consent and proceeded to rebuild the village. Norse, Roman and Old Magic elders were summoned and a peace was negotiated. The three groups agreed to a common law and in 972 the commander of the Roman mages sealed the agreement by entering into marriage with the daughter of the village elder. He vowed to turn swords to ploughshares and took up residence in the village, which was renamed Hogsmeade. The Norman mercenary and the Norse rune mistress also remained, and each began to take magical students. Twenty years later, they began construction of a magical castle on Hogwards Hill, and seven years after that they began to board students."

Hermione let out a slow breath before she said, "That's not at all how the Founding is described in *Hogwarts: A History*."

Madam Mcllvaine said, "I'm not surprised at that. History is written by the victors, after all. Now let me tell you the rest of the story:

"The four mages soon began to disagree on which qualities were desired in a student. The Roman commander – Gryffindor – naturally favoured bravery of the sort seen on the battlefield. The rune mistress – Ravenclaw – was a scholar by inclination, and her work in the classroom only strengthened that. The mercenary – Slytherin – was also a scholar but of a different sort. He was fascinated by rituals, something that was unfamiliar to him before he encountered the Old Magic community. He was also quite frightened of non-magical people. On the other hand, the Old Magic communities had long

known the proper wardings and rituals to keep the non-magical at bay. In fact, it was the village's daughter – Hufflepuff – who placed the base wardings on the castle. As one who was raised in a community of magic with rituals that required the cooperation of all, Hufflepuff was appalled by the idea of any sort of exclusion. Thus she would accept any that the others would decline.

“Over time, Hufflepuff became concerned by Slytherin's distortions of ritual magic. With the support of the Old Magic community, she demanded that Slytherin cease teaching ritual magics. He in turn demanded that any students borne of non-magical parents be removed from their homes entirely, so that the school would remain insulated from all persons non-magical. Gryffindor agreed with Slytherin, and so Hufflepuff reluctantly agreed in order to stop Slytherin's teachings. Ravenclaw's view on this has been lost to the ages.

“Some say that Slytherin was banished from the school. Others say he left of his own accord. Some say that he became more and more radical about the so-called Muggle-born, until the other three could no longer tolerate him. Our histories say that Slytherin left because he wanted to continue his pursuit of ritual magics and Hufflepuff thwarted him at every turn. Whatever the case, he had left the school by 1028. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, however, demanded that Slytherin's house – his community of learners – be allowed to remain under the leadership of one of Slytherin's apprentices, a young mage named Peverell. The Peverell family and others continued Slytherin's explorations into ritual magic, at first openly and later in secret.

“A few decades later, the second invaders came: the Normans. Their mages came along with William the Conqueror's armies. They were already aligned with Roman magic and many of them quickly gravitated to Slytherin and Gryffindor's way of thinking. Both were still alive at that time: Gryffindor as headmaster of what was then still called Hogwards School, and Slytherin as the head of an exclusive magical order that delved deeply into the arcane. Like their non-magical counterparts, the Norman mages eventually prevailed. They came to dominate English magical society and magical thought.

“Eventually... two hundred and seventy years after the last of the school founders – Hufflepuff – had passed on... the Normans managed to forge a unified magical government with limited fealty to the English and Scottish monarchs. In so doing, they codified part of the agreement between Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Ritual magic would be forever excluded from the school curriculum. The Roman style of magic would be advocated and managed by the new government. All would be prohibited from starting another magical school without approval of the government. The Old Magic families would be prohibited from taking on apprentices who were not of the Old Magic families by either blood or marriage. At the same time, the Old Magic families would be protected by the government and would receive large grants of land and treasure. Old Magic community rituals would be enshrined into public festivals and major acts of the government.

“The Old Magic community was implicitly threatened by force – explicitly in some cases – and they capitulated. The Compact went into force in 1407, and from then forward the Old Magic families were referred to as the Compact Families. In one stroke, the Normans managed to effectively ban the old magics from English society. How could we send our children to a school that couldn't teach our style of magic? How could we participate in a government that for the most part didn't recognise our magic as legitimate? Some Old Magic families crossed over in those days. Few Roman families wanted to lose their children to Old Magic, and it became harder and harder to bring new blood into our communities.

“One generation after the Compact was signed, there were two hundred and thirty-eight Compact Families. Today there are nine. Before You-Know-Who's first rise, all nine families were robust. In recent times, we had some successes in bringing Muggle-born mages into our families. Three of the families became polygamous in order to raise their birthrate.

“Twenty years ago, he began killing our heirs –”

Hermione gasped, “Voldemort killed your children?”

“In our family's case, there was a single child – my daughter,” Madam McIlvaine said. “Regrettably, the McIlvaines intermarried too often.

Despite the fact that my husband Connor was a second-generation mage from Canada, I was only able to bring Dierdre to term. I miscarried four times previously.”

Hermione rose to her feet and took Madam Mcllvaine's hand. “I'm so sorry,” she said.

Madam Mcllvaine squeezed her hand and said, “Thank you; that is most kind. I fear your sympathies toward me are about to change, however.”

Hermione's brow furrowed and she said, “Unless you're about to tell us that you've become a blood purist, I doubt that very much.” Madam Mcllvaine released Hermione's hand but Hermione held firm.

“How did you meet my parents?” Harry asked.

“I met them at a Quidditch match, actually. Connor was a rabid fan and it was a guilty pleasure for me; my parents disapproved of sport. James was a reserve Chaser for Puddlemere at the time, freshly out of school. He went into the match in the sixth hour and proceeded to score sixteen consecutive goals. Portree had to pull their Keeper and in the end their Seeker took the snitch and the loss just to end the match. Rather than go to his mates, your father instead flew directly to your mother. I remember saying to Connor, 'Now that's someone worth meeting',” Madam Mcllvaine answered.

“Why did you decide on the betrothal agreement?” asked Harry.

Hermione was absolutely pole-axed; she spluttered, “Be... betrothal?”

“I did say your sympathies would change,” said Madam Mcllvaine.

“I didn't know about this until the end of last term,” Harry told Hermione, “and obviously it's broken now.”

“But... but some betrothals are between families and they follow on until someone is eligible –” Hermione started.

Madam Mcllvaine frowned; “A loathsome practice,” she said, “and one I'd not be a party to,” she said.

Hermione visibly slumped in her seat and said, “Thank goodness for that... Harry? Is this why you've been so different?”

“I've been different?” Harry asked.

Hermione said with a slight blush, “I think you know what I mean. You've been... 'clinging' is the wrong word, since I haven't been bothered by it in the least... er... let's say that you've been adamant about wanting me close.”

“Oh, my...” Madam Mcllvaine said, and she closed her eyes intently.

“It's not like that,” Harry said quickly.

Madam Mcllvaine's eyes snapped open, and she said, “I'm not a prude. The both of you feel quite close to one another, and you're of age or nearly so. I warn that you should be betrothed or handfasted in the proper forms before your relationship is consummated. There is a power within you bursting to be released, Mr. Potter. You're not lacking in power yourself, Miss Granger. Some of the power I feel in this room... I've never before encountered its like outside of our community. Proper rites of betrothal and bonding can release or enhance abilities, and you wouldn't want to miss that opportunity; it only comes once, after all.”

“Are you referring to soul bonds?” Hermione asked.

Madam Mcllvaine broke into an almost musical laugh. “Soul bonds? Oh, my! I'm afraid that there is no such thing. Soul bonds are something for those penny dreadfuls at Flourish and Blotts,” she managed to say.

Hermione caught Harry's questioning look, and grumbled, “Mrs. Weasley reads them.”

Madam Mcllvaine laughed again and patted Hermione's hand. She said, “You don't need to be ashamed. They're good fun, really. 'Oh,

Thurston! Now that we are truly soul bonded, we can share each other's thoughts and feelings!' Can you imagine hearing all of your lover's thoughts? I should think it would be more pain than pleasure. If my Connor was any example – and I believe he was a better man than most – then it's a sure thing that all young men are perverted.”

“Oi!” Harry protested.

Hermione said, “Carlotta and Thurston are ridiculous, aren't they?”

“Er... you read those books?” Harry ventured.

Hermione snapped, “Oh, honestly, Harry! A girl can read something besides schoolbooks, can't she?” Harry looked suitably cowed, and she smirked at him.

Returning to the matter at hand, Madam Mcllvaine said, “You know about the betrothal, but are you aware of the offer I took to your Wizengamot?”

Harry nodded. “My solicitor – he's a wizard called Ted Tonks – wrote to me about it. Dumbledore wouldn't let you take me.”

“You tried to take Harry in?” Hermione confirmed.

“I've met Mr. Tonks; if he is as he seems, then you've made a good choice,” Madam Mcllvaine said before she answered Hermione, “I offered to carry through with House Mcllvaine's portion of the betrothal agreement: to give Harry house room and protection, among other things. The Headmaster was unwilling to support me in this, and I didn't expect any true backing from the other governing wizards. Many of their ancestors were responsible for the Compact. To them, my community is powerful and unpredictable and outside of their understanding – three things that those in power dislike in others. As a sop, the Headmaster awarded me a seat on the Hogwarts Board. The Compact offered that to our community, but no one had ever taken it up. I had hoped to have some influence on your schooling. I didn't count on sharing the floor with some of You-Know-Who's followers.”

“So... do you really think you could have protected me?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I believe so. We have an affinity for warding that the Roman ways can not imitate, and You-Know-Who could not have countered them without bringing one of our own to his side. Our wards were sound. I wouldn't have lost my daughter and husband if not for arrogance. We should have remained on the ancestral grounds until You-Know-Who was well and truly gone,” she answered.

“His name is Voldemort, you know,” Harry said firmly.

“Names are not trifling things, Mr. Potter; they are used with intention in rituals and oaths. Names should be used wisely and not unnecessarily,” Madam Mcllvaine returned. Hermione looked thoughtful at that; for his part, Harry stayed silent.

“Madam Mcllvaine, may I ask why you decided to make an agreement outside of the Old Magic families? Wouldn't that have kept Harry from going to Hogwarts? I assume that's why this Compact was so successful in keeping a divide: the larger community didn't want to give up their children,” Hermione said.

“Well spotted,” Madam Mcllvaine said approvingly, “but there is one significant difference between House Mcllvaine and the other remaining Old Magic families. The rest of the families adopted the Nordic family structures – they are patrilineal. We were and have remained matrilineal. Although my daughter would have joined Harry in marriage, she would have remained Heir to my House. She would have been wife to the Heir of House Potter and he would have been consort to the Heir of House Mcllvaine. This allowed us a novel loophole in the Compact, but one which we had not before exercised with English wizards – after all, what English House would be willing to offer their own Heir to sire the Heir of another house? My grandmother said that her ancestors believed a geas was invoked on the other families to make them give up matrilineage. Our House Heir in those days was already an adult yet was not present at the Compact signing; she was nine months pregnant at the time.

“As for why we decided to strike an agreement with the Potters...? Firstly, they weren't put off by our requirements. Mr. Potter's father

wasn't bothered by the idea of binding his first granddaughter to House McIlvaine, and I do think that Mr. Potter's mother would have hexed him had he objected. Secondly, they weren't interested in our wealth or possessions, nor were they trying to change us. Thirdly, we liked them and they liked us. The idea that we would get on well with the parents of our daughter's consort was very appealing. Fourthly, they didn't seek to tightly bind the agreement. Mr. Potter, both you and my daughter were given the freedom to break the agreement before coming of age. The four of us hoped that at the least you would each find a lifelong friend from the bargain, but all of us found repugnant the idea of forcing a marriage. But most importantly, the agreement allowed Mr. Potter's father to access the McIlvaine grimoire."

She turned to Harry and took his hands; he flinched for an instant, but she held tight and said to him, "Mr. Potter, we knew that there was a prophecy that involved both yourself and... that horrible creature. We didn't know the whole of it, but it was obvious that you were key to getting rid of him and that you needed extraordinary protections. Your mother was a serious scholar of magic, and she wasn't put off by the differences between Old Magic and the Roman ways. She had an exceptional mind. The world lost much by her death – and your father's as well; don't misunderstand me. She had deduced that Old Magic would offer the best alternatives for her purposes. Your father entered the McIlvaine grimoire with your mother's instructions, and returned with a ritual I had never before seen and that I didn't entirely understand. I can only say that she was very excited, and I suspect that the ritual had something to do with your survival."

"That's why Croaker couldn't balance the bridging equation... he didn't recognise that there was a ritual component..." Hermione said in a near-whisper.

"Are you talking about your project for Dumbledore?" Harry asked, even as Madam McIlvaine asked, "Croaker... are you referring to Algernon Croaker?"

"Yes, and yes," Hermione said.

Madam Mcllvaine gritted her teeth. "Algernon Croaker attempted to have the Compact repealed, in exchange for giving his... his merry band of demon spawn access to the Old Magics. He actually succeeded in gaining some support from your Wizengamot. My grandmother threatened to banish him to Tartarus, or so my mother claimed. He understood that to mean 'no' and the issue was never broached again. I am surprised that he is still alive."

"He must be about one hundred and seventy," Harry said.

"His 'demon spawn'...?" Hermione asked.

"Your so-called Department of Mysteries: the ones who would own magic – as if it can be owned," Madam Mcllvaine spat.

"I don't know what the Department of Mysteries does, actually, not even after seeing it. I do know that Croaker might very well be a demon – a nasty one, at that. He hates Hermione, that's for certain," Harry said.

"As I said before, those sort dislike things outside of their understanding," Madam Mcllvaine said.

Harry straightened in his chair, and said, "Thank you for everything you did. Just because things didn't work out doesn't mean you didn't try to help me. If I'm understanding this rightly, you actually saved my life. If the House of Potter can ever do anything for you, it'll be done."

Madam Mcllvaine's eyes filled with unshed tears. "Thank you, Harry," she said. "That's related to why I wished to see you. I would like to revive the agreement."

"Er... revive the agreement?" Harry asked.

Hermione sat bolt upright and demanded, "I thought you said this wasn't entailed! You aren't seriously considering marrying Harry, are you?"

Madam Mcllvaine's eyes widened and she stared at the two of them for several seconds before she said, "Marry?" She chuckled and then

broke into full-on laughter. “Be married to Mr. Potter? Oh – oh, dear! The looks on your faces!” she gasped.

Harry cleared his throat and asked uneasily, “What did you have in mind, then?”

Madam Mcllvaine took a moment to compose herself before she said, “I have no desire to marry again – and certainly not to you, Mr. Potter. Without an heir, House Mcllvaine and all that pertains will revert to one of the remaining Old Magic families. I propose that House Potter agree to provide House Mcllvaine with an heir at some future date. Should anything happen to me, then you would serve as regent until you produce a daughter. In return, House Mcllvaine will provide house room if needed, protection if possible, and access for the Head of House Potter to the Mcllvaine grimoire. Perhaps something from within the grimoire can help you destroy that monster once and for all time?”

Harry sat dumbfounded by the idea. It was so far outside his experience that he struggled to think of all the consequences. He would be promising that a future daughter born from a future wife would take over a House about which he knew little or nothing. He didn't understand Old Magic – wasn't even certain what it entailed – but he did know that Voldemort was afraid of it. If Madam Mcllvaine wasn't on the good side of things, he figured that his parents would never have considered a betrothal or friendship.

“Do it,” Hermione said abruptly.

Jarred from his thoughts, Harry said, “Pardon?”

“Do it,” she repeated. “There could be something in there as powerful as the ritual your mother used. You need to do this.”

“It's not a small thing,” said Harry.

“What, providing an heir?” Hermione asked.

“Well... yeah,” Harry admitted.

“Harry, anyone who really loves you will understand. It's not as if someone would show up and take away your daughter, after all,” Hermione said.

Harry startled at the mention of his daughter aloud, but Hermione's point did leave him more comfortable with Madam Mcllvaine's request. “Can I think on this? Not long, but a day or two?” he asked.

“I agree with you that this is no small thing. It is right to give this careful consideration. Your owl and no other will be able to find me, should you send a reply. Now then... it is nearly time for the saining,” Madam Mcllvaine said. When she stood, she first clasped Hermione's hands for a moment, and then drew Harry into a gentle hug.

“Someone said that before... what is a saining?” Hermione asked.

“The saining is a house-blessing for the new year,” Madam Mcllvaine explained; “Each head of house lights a branch from the village bonfire. The hearth of each house is lit by its branch, and then we use the branches to inscribe runes for growth, strength, health and protection on the lintel of each house. At the end, the branches are returned and put into the bonfire.”

“That sounds lovely,” said Hermione.

Harry said, “I'd like to do that for the Black Tower sometime... maybe next year?”

“It can be performed on the new year, or on the winter solstice itself – that's when we bless our own homes,” Madam Mcllvaine said; “I'm not allowed to teach you the rite, but nothing prevents you from learning by observation.” She moved aside and added, “I don't wish to be impolite, but I do need to join my brethren.”

Madam Mcllvaine removed the runic protections and Harry held open the garret door for her. He and Hermione followed her down the stairs, but at a slower pace. By the time they left The Three Broomsticks, she had already disappeared into the crowd that surrounded the great bonfire.

* * * * *

A SAINING GONE HORRIBLY WRONG

Harry and Hermione are surprised to find Ron amongst the crowd. He is with Lavender Brown, whose grandparents' home is in Hogsmeade. Hermione and Lavender are civil to each other, if not exactly warm.

Adrian Pucey is also in the crowd, along with Cho Chang. It seems that the Puceys have been regular revellers in Hogsmeade for years, but Niall and his wife stayed in London this year; the attack on their home took its toll on their nerves. Ginny is also present, in the company of Anthony Goldstein:

"Happy New Year, Harry," Ginny exclaimed. Her cheeks were pinked from the cold, and she was arm-in-arm with Anthony Goldstein.

"Happy New Year, Ginny," Harry returned; "Good to see you again, Anthony... or is it Tony?"

Anthony's lips pursed for a moment before he said, "Whichever you like, I suppose. I admit that it sounds better coming from Ginny than from you."

Harry smiled and said, "Anthony it is, then."

Anthony turned to Hermione and said, "Happy New Year, Hermione. You're looking rested, much better than during the term."

"You shan't need to talk with Dumbledore," Hermione said with a sharp edge.

Anthony gave a slight nod before he asked evenly, "Did Harry tell you, or did you suss it out on your own?"

Hermione was only slightly less sharp than before. "It was on my own, with the help of some unintended hints. There was a rather short list of potential suspects, you know?" she said.

Ginny cut in, "Have you ever seen anything like this? All the people and the decorations, and the fire...!"

"It's great," Hermione said flatly.

Anthony said, "We used to come for this every year... I thought it would be a good way to remember, you know? There's always been a bit of kinship with us and the Compact families, being third-class citizens and such."

The saining begins with a mass gathering around the bonfire at the centre of the village. The members of the Compact families place runes and perform an unfamiliar incantation that makes the bonfire grow to ten times its previous size without the corresponding heat. Harry notices that one of the members seems to be chanting differently than the others; the same man lingers over his set of runes. Harry recalls Snape's countercursing at his first-year Quidditch match, and wonders what the man is up to. He manages to catch Madam Mcllvaine long enough to find out the man's name – Laurence Lochsley; she says that Lochsley is an experimenter and may have been twiddling with some family magics. Harry remains suspicious.

The heads of each household in Hogsmeade collect their lit branches and begin a procession back to their homes. Harry notices that there are more cloaked wizards than before, and that they are lingering at the edges of the crowd. He takes Hermione by the hand and starts looking for Aurors. She looks for Ron as they move along.

The bonfire starts to grow again as the residents of Hogsmeade move back into their homes. Stragglers in the crowd turn and begin moving toward the bonfire. Harry feels a strong impulse to walk toward the fire but stops himself and wraps his arm around Hermione before she can change direction. He starts a measured move toward the bonfire, careful to guard his thoughts.

He finds Scrimgeour near the bonfire, frantically signalling for the rest of the Aurors on scene. Apparently, Fudge ordered the bulk of the force to cover Diagon Alley rather than Hogsmeade, and Scrimgeour only has five other Aurors at his command. He asks Harry point-blank

if he has seen anyone casting the Imperius curse. Harry relates the impulse he felt a few moments earlier.

Hermione kneels and opens her pack; several heavy books tumble forth. When Harry gives her a dark look – as it's now quite clear that she's getting her dark books from the goblins, and hasn't stopped – she snaps at him and begins flipping pages rapidly. She moves from the books to her own books filled with notes and diagrams. At some point, she's joined by Anthony Goldstein.

People continue to mill toward the bonfire. Scrimgeour and Harry are horrified to see two of them walk straight into the fire as though it was nothing; the two people are consumed almost instantly. Scrimgeour attempts to stun two more approaching, but his spells curve away from their targets and into the flames. Harry tries to force his “rogue” magic (the sort he's been experiencing in relation to Hermione) and manages to fling one person away from the fire, but finds himself dragged toward it several feet before he can stop his slide.

Madam Mcllvaine races toward them, stops a few feet short of the fire, and uses her wand to begin burning runes into the ground. She, Hermione and Anthony have a rapid conversation that Harry can't follow – and in any case, he and Scrimgeour are too busy physically knocking people to the ground for him to pay a lot of attention. Adrian Pucey attempts to help them; he succeeds for a while but in the end has to ask Harry to stun him before he's drawn to the flames.

Their attention is stolen again when one of Hogsmeade's larger homes erupts into flames. With Scrimgeour and his fellow Aurors engaged in literally knocking people out, Harry heads alone toward the burning home even as a second bursts into flame. He encounters two Death Eaters; he stuns one, and returns fire from the second with a Reductor curse that destroys the Death Eater's lower leg. The Death Eaters have sealed the residents into their homes. Harry looks through the windows of a third home in horror as their burning branch catches an interior wall on fire and the residents calmly walk into the flames.

Harry returns to the two incapacitated Death Eaters. He binds them and demands to know how to unseal the homes. The one whose leg

is destroyed speaks little English. The other is young and sounds Scottish. Harry drags him by the cloak toward the burning home; the Death Eater, thinking that Harry is going to cast him into the flames, relents and gives Harry the counter-curses. Harry stuns him again and begins racing from home to home.

Harry finds Ron pounding on the windows of the Brown home, which is already afire. Half of the family has already marched into the flames, but Lavender is at the sealed window – the room is mostly smoke-filled. Harry casts the counter-curse and she opens the window. There is a loud sucking sound as air rushes in, and the fire explodes outward. Harry and Ron are thrown more than twenty feet, and a severely burned Lavender falls nearby. Ron shouts for help and tries to cast the few healing charms that a sixth year knows. Harry tells Ron to pick her up and proceeds to pop Ron and Lavender to the Hogwarts infirmary and a shocked Madam Pomfrey. Harry runs out of the infirmary door and pops back to Hogsmeade, where he continues his dash from house to house.

Once the houses are liberated, there is an equally large problem as people promptly begin flowing toward the bonfire. Harry finds Croaker with Madam Mcllvaine and Hermione; Hermione apparently summoned him with a Patronus. Croaker identifies the flames as the Fire of Prometheus, which Madam Mcllvaine knows as Demon's Fire. The fire will draw out all things magical within the boundaries of its summoning, which appear to surround the entire village. They argue vehemently about what to do. Goldstein points out that there appears to be a hole in the ritual seals for the fire, which may allow it to escape the village and enter the Forbidden Forest. Scrimgeour states the obvious: that this would allow it to head unimpeded toward Hogwarts itself.

The argument is broken by the growing effort needed to force people away from the growing fire by whatever means necessary. Croaker announces that he's off to bring a group of Unspeakables. Madam Mcllvaine and Goldstein realise that Hermione has already initiated a ritual; too late to interrupt, they scurry to help her bring it off properly.

A whirlwind appears next to the bonfire and begins to suck in the magical flames. A noxious smell fills the village as first the bonfire

and then the flames within each home are drawn into the whirlwind and apparently sent to nothingness. Hermione struggles to contain the whirlwind, but succeeds in sending it away after Madam Mcllvaine fails.

The Unspeakables arrive with Croaker just as Hermione, Madam Mcllvaine and Goldstein are closing the ritual. One of the Unspeakables is Mr. Whyte, whom Harry met briefly at MacLeish's party and who was identified there as the Head Unspeakable. He accuses Hermione of engaging in banned practices by summoning a Whirling Dervish. Madam Mcllvaine stares Mr. Whyte down and declares that she performed the summoning but required the assistance of the two students to complete the ritual. The Unspeakables continue buzzing about Hermione's involvement and their desire to know more about how she did it.

Harry coldly interrupts and points out that they should be more interested in who started the magical fire in the first place. Chastened, the Compact family members other than Madam Mcllvaine are brought to the Three Broomsticks and questioned by Scrimgeour, observed by Mr. Whyte, Croaker and Harry. While the two youngest are willing to speak, the next called forth refuses to say a word until Whyte and Croaker are dismissed and the room swept for any monitoring devices they might have planted. When they show no willingness to comply, Harry ushers the two men out. Mr. Whyte makes vaguely threatening comments to Harry; Harry responds by casually pointing out that while the Dept. of Mysteries is independent of the rest of the Ministry, its funding is not. Mr. Whyte leaves; Croaker berates Harry for making an enemy of Mr. Whyte and the Unspeakables; Harry dismisses Croaker entirely.

One of the elder Compact family heads – Lochsley, the one who Harry watched suspiciously at the outset – is evasive while questioned. The man manages to cast a wandless confounding ward unrecognised by everyone (Madam Mcllvaine concludes later that it was a specific family magic), and escapes along with three of the four captured Death Eaters. Scrimgeour, at a loss for how to proceed, summons Madam Bones – who was on duty in Diagon Alley per the Minister's request.

Bones, in consultation with Scrimgeour, Madam McIlvaine, the village chief Macandra, Harry and others, concludes that it is for the best to assign responsibility to the Death Eaters, until or unless the involvement of the Compact family head is found to be of his own free will. Dumbledore, who arrives quite late, agrees – and further agrees that Minister Fudge should receive an expurgated report of the event.

Adrian Pucey is unable to find Cho Chang. It is eventually confirmed that she perished in the fire.

Before the evening is done, it is determined that forty-six people were consumed and fifty-three injured; two Death Eaters died and four were captured. Scrimgeour and his Aurors, with help from Harry, Adrian Pucey, Anthony Goldstein and others, kept as many as eighty people from walking into the fire. Madam Rosmerta, her barmaids and Ginny Weasley held dozens inside the Three Broomsticks.

Harry and Hermione return to Hogwarts. On the way, she tells him that two of Scrimgeour's Aurors had flanked her to prevent the Unspeakables from attempting to spirit her away; they had done the same for Anthony Goldstein until it was clear that the Unspeakables had little or no interest in him.

H and H arrive at the Hospital Wing to a distraught Ron and the two remaining (and injured) members of the Brown family. Lavender died from her burns, despite Madam Pomfrey's best efforts and the summoning of healers from St. Mungo's. H and H attempt to comfort Ron, who is convinced that he somehow killed her. Ginny arrives with Anthony Goldstein and Adrian Pucey. Everyone is shaken, although Harry notices that Goldstein seems to be holding up better than the rest; chalks it up to him being further removed than the rest (even though Cho was his housemate).

Unlike Ron, Adrian Pucey is angry rather than distraught. Harry prevents him from making a magical oath to avenge Cho, and makes him promise to meet with Harry before he does anything rash.

Family members begin to trickle in. H and H take the opportunity to leave. Exhausted, they both go to Harry's quarters. Without prelude – no cleaning up, undressing, etc – they fall asleep in his bed.

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FOLLOW WITH JANUARY 1 DAILY PROPHET ARTICLE

Fudge in serious difficulty, over his decision (“based on excellent intelligence”) to concentrate Auror resources at Diagon Alley

DFDL broke up a Death Eater raid in Cornwall during the New Year events; with commitment of Auror forces, DMLE never even responded

Uncertainty over how Hogsmeade was saved; rumours that it was through the invocation of arcane and Dark magic, but no complaints to be found from the villagers